

## RELIGION AND CHIEFTAINCY: THE CASE OF AKAN CHIEFTAINCY

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The world of African culture is rooted in religious paradigm because for the African mind religion or spiritual dimension is the source of both identity and meaning. This means that religion or spiritual dimension shapes the forms of cultural expression- symbolic, material, aesthetic, moral, intellectual and spiritual etc. The pre-eminence of religion as the substance that holds society together is most visibly expressed in traditional leadership institutions.

The legal, social, moral, military etc. authority of traditional leadership is based on the spiritual status of the leader who acts as the link between the society and the spiritual foundations of the community. This status of leadership, which unites the spiritual and the physical in the person of the ruler, gives the leader the right to rule. The rituals of installation, which legitimize traditional leadership status and roles suggest that the installation process transforms an ordinary person into a sacred person, who becomes the representative of the spiritual founders of the society and thus the locus of their power and authority. The person who acquires this status as the representative of, and link with the spiritual founders of the society through the rituals of installation then qualifies to rule and lead the people.

The taboos governing leadership are meant to prevent the leader from any act that may defile the office of the leader as the representative and the link with the spiritual founders of the society. Such acts render leadership impotent and illegitimate. The moral and spiritual power of the oaths of office which is protected by the taboos of office implies that once one breaks the protective taboos of office one loses the right to be a worthy representative and a link with the spiritual founders of the society. The loss of right to represent the spiritual founders of the society is synonymous with losing the right to be a leader.

#### Stool Polity

The stool on which the chief sits symbolizes the link between him and the founding ancestors and also the social contract with the people that defines his relationship with them. The stool therefore becomes a sacred location or the temple that represents the abiding presence of the founding ancestors and the soul of the people. This is the reason why as part of the enstoolment rituals, the chief is expected to sleep in the stool room of the founding ancestor so that they would transfer their virtues to him in order to make him a worthy representative and a legitimate link between the ancestors and the living. In the same way the ritual of the blackening of the stool symbolizes the way in which a chief who through the rituals of installation becomes a “de jure” ancestor proceeds on to become a “de facto” ancestor through the burial and funeral rites. The funeral rituals that culminate in the blackening of the stool of a chief who has reigned properly as a worthy representative of the founding ancestors, makes him a permanent link in the chain of chiefs that stretch from the founding ancestors to future chiefs. The ancestral authority that legitimizes the reigning chiefs resides in the stool, which symbolizes the link between him and the ancestors, and the people.



### **(The Chief as Nana)**

The title nana is a way of recognizing the sacred personality that the chief acquires as a result of the installation rituals. This title legitimizes his status as a “de jure” ancestor, who has the mandate of the ancestors to rule the people on their behalf and in accordance with their values, ideals and traditions. For this same reason, the reigning chief is obliged to celebrate the cycles of Adaye feasts Odwira festival, to renew his ties with the ancestors (Akrong: 1991, 197).

Thus the title Nana does not only describe the sacred status that the chief has acquired through installation but also the parental status implied in being a representative of the ancestors (Akrong: 1991, 194). This parental role is inseparable from the social persona of the chief because the process of transformation that makes the chief a sacred persona simultaneously makes him a representative of the ancestors, a link between the living and the departed ancestors, and a “de facto” parent of the living because he has now become “de jure” ancestor.

### **Chief as Parent**

According to J.B. Danquah, the title Nana given to chiefs describes the essential parental function of the chief as both the ideal father and mother who must take care of the people like the departed ancestors nananom (Danquah 1943:109). For example, the role of a chief as a judge is based on the parental duty of ensuring peace and harmony in the home. The chief therefore as a representative of the ancestors and a parent, is under obligation to ensure peace, justice, fairness and harmony among his people. And in the discharge of his duties as the judge, the chief is expected to be compassionate and fair to reflect the moral ideals of the ancestors who are the real rulers of the society, (Akrong 1991: 197)